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Citation: White, Alan (2010) Let every flower bloom - an organic approach to introducing PebblePad. In: The 1st International PebblePad Conference (PebbleBash 2010), 9-10 June 2010, Shifnal, Shropshire.

URL:

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Case Study

Let every flower bloom – an organic approach to introducing PebblePad

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The background context

We started from the belief that if PebblePad was going to be used to the maximum extent of its flexibility, then people would have to use it the way that they wanted to rather than have its use imposed. We also realised that in order to

achieve this aim, there would need to be a system in place that would encourage, guide and support people in how they wanted to use it. Everything that follows in this case-study stems from this initial position.

The current practice

Northumbria consists of approximately 32,000 students in 9 schools, each of which maintains a certain level of self-sufficiency and autonomy, although technology for use in teaching and learning is provided centrally. Northumbria has been a Blackboard institution since 1999 and now has a high level of take-up (admittedly there is a wide variation in the amount and nature of that take-up). Day to day running of all teaching and learning technologies is the concern of the LTech team, consisting of academics, learning technologists, helpdesk staff, content creators and programmers.

Operational management includes LTech together with representatives from IT, the student administration team and the library.

Various evaluations of Blackboard suggest that it is liked by students but seen very much as a teacher controlled environment. Primarily, students like the facility to access teaching materials. We were also conscious that whilst Blackboard has obvious merit for teachers who prefer behaviourist type approaches, it is a less welcoming place for those who choose to use constructive and collaborative approaches to learning.



There are some pockets of excellent use of Blackboard discussion boards, wikis and blogs at Northumbria, but on the whole students dislike the teacher ability to control and oversee, as well as the necessity for the teacher to set up the function in the first place. There is evidence of students using Facebook as a learning space, and at one level we are happy to encourage this (there is an ongoing pilot; it will be interesting to see whether the formal recogni-

tion of Facebook will lead to it being seen as a less attractive place and as a teacher controlled space). On the other hand, there is recognition of the ephemeral nature of Facebook and the difficulty of using it to create a historical record of the construction of learning.

Whilst the nature of learning and teaching is important to an institution such as Northumbria, it was also helpful that other drivers came together at the same time, helping to focus institutional vision towards alternative technological approaches. Northumbria has recently participated in the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Benchmarking programme, out of which came the imperative to make more effective use of the VLE and enhance student learning through creative use of new and existing technologies.

We also thought that a product such as PebblePad may have an influence on a number of other work packages identified in the institutional benchmarking report, including approval procedures for all online learning, workload, staff development, student stakeholders and widening participation, as well as lifelong and lifewide learning.

In addition, from the National Student Survey came recognition that students wanted more timely and constructive feedback and feedforward, and the most recent University Teaching and Learning Strategy underlined an emphasis on e-learning and PDP as well as collaboration and assessment.

The challenge

The decision was taken to buy 5,000 PebblePad licences, with the option to increase if the initial pilot was successful. We considered PebblePad to be exciting technology with huge potential, and assumed a large proportion of students and staff would be equally interested.

Our immediate problem was that we didn't have the resources to support a large number of people across the whole range of PebblePad features, and might have to concentrate on delivering instruction, and on only a limited range of features, which ran contrary to our belief about

what PebblePad should be.

We knew that a bottom-up approach would ensure that PebblePad use was grounded in what people actually wanted, especially if that approach included both staff and students, and

we knew a top-down approach would give the authority needed. We also felt a two-way approach from the middle would be more likely to mean that there was continuity and integration

across the student career. Our problem was that we were not really sure how to bring these three strands together in an effective and efficient way.

The approach

It was at this time that we successfully applied to participate in the Enhancement Academy initiative run by the Higher Education Academy (HEA), in which our intention was to create and develop a system which would structure not only the implementation of PebblePad but also be used as a basis for the introduction of any major teaching and learning technology in the future.

The initiative brought together 9 institutions to explore the enhancement of teaching and learning through technology, and whilst each institution developed its own strategy, there was a combined synergy and level of support. Furthermore, although the use of technology was key to the outcomes, the emphasis was very much non-technical, with the recognition that whilst long term enhancement has to be grounded in the achievement of change, it also needs to be seen as a social process rather than a technological one.

A three day retreat with other teams from the Enhancement Academy was a luxury but also an intensive and positive experience, not least through the support of expert advisers brought in from the HEA.

In brief, the teams were encouraged to consider their environmental position in respect of their proposed enhancement and their strategic relationships with the rest of the university, through the use of rich pictures.

This was followed by an examination of the implementation process, including analysis of the myths and traditions of the institution's culture, a full stakeholder analysis and also a walkthrough of potential challenges and barriers. Finally, the retreat was rounded off with the creation of an evaluation pathway for each project.

Following the event, our identified stakeholders were brought together in a Northumbria version of the HEA retreat, which involved key teaching and central staff, senior management (particularly Associate Deans and the Deputy Vice



Chancellor for Teaching and Learning) and student representatives as well as the Students' Union. Two days were set aside for the event, which also included four outside experts from institutions with extensive experience of eportfolio work (mostly PebblePad but also including Mahara) as well as Matthew Wheeler from PebblePad.

“All of the outside participants presented an overview of their own experience of portfolio work and also contributed immensely to the various discussions and groupwork.”

To a large extent the retreat followed the pattern established by the HEA; a rich picture of what each school wanted an eportfolio to be, followed by an opportunity to develop strategies for implementation and enhancement in the presence of constructive support from other teams.

The issues

As part of the roll-out, each school was invited to identify a champion or champions who would act as the focal point within the school for the initiative.

The background of the champions varied and included administrators as well as senior and newly qualified teaching staff. Their role description was left deliberately vague, on the recognition that each champion was almost by definition a person with a certain amount of enthusiasm and commitment, who would likely be able to mould the position to fit the context of the school or department. In this way, the implementation was more likely to be owned by each school rather than seen as something being imposed on them.



The result

It is still very early in the life of the project, but so far things are progressing more smoothly than we could have hoped. Each champion has been visited regularly by members of the team, and supported in their choice of approach.

No timescale has been imposed on any of the schools, but most of them have set their own targets and expectations and are firmly in charge of their own pilots and projects.

To date, some of the projects include:

- Creation of a workbook template based around forms and profiles for a competency based health programme. This is being piloted by student volunteers with a view to launch programme-wide in September.
- Liaison of Careers Service and academic staff to support students in lifelong learning, with an emphasis on employability.
- Student presentation of work using PebblePad as a wiki.
- Student submission of previously Blackboard-based eportfolios.
- Creation of group webfolios, where each student owns their own pages and can critique others.
- Use of PebblePad in fieldwork.
- Use of PebblePad for Personal Development Planning.
- Use of PebblePad as an induction tool.

- Study skills packages designed by the library with an emphasis on recording of achievement.
- Of course, none of the above is particularly innovative, but they are nonetheless pleasing to the planning team. A great deal has been achieved in only a few months, with a relatively small amount of resource, and appropriately for a tool of the nature of PebblePad, has been achieved in a collaborative and constructive way.

In brief

- PebblePad is a flexible tool which can be used in many ways by different people. If its implementation does not reflect that then there is a possibility that it can simply become another institutional tool.
- Collaboration at all levels of the university is essential.
- When people feel in control of a project, success is much more likely.
- Investment at the beginning pays dividends.
- And – ironically – if you really want flexibility, then you have to have all the right structures in place.

Acknowledgements

Case study by Alan White
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